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People's Law Center shut down

Agency aided poor; money problems cited

By Joseph Barrios

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The Southern Arizona People's Law Center, which offered legal help to the poor for more than 12 years, has closed.

The closure came after the nonprofit center faced a funding crisis.

Last year, the center's budget had grown to more than \$170,000 a year. But as funding sources dried up, all full- and part-time employees had been laid off except for attorney Paul Gattone, founder of the center. Facing at least a \$60,000 shortfall, Gattone didn't have the drive or the money to keep the center open by himself.

"We were going into another financial crisis. I realized at the end that I was burned out on the constant hustling for money," Gattone said. "It emotionally got to the point where I was worn out."

The office officially closed Monday. The center had about two dozen pending cases, which are being referred to other lawyers. Gattone is continuing to work for free on three ongoing civil rights cases.

Andy Silverman, a University of Arizona law professor and member of the center's board of directors, said the decision to close was difficult. He said that once Gattone resigned in December, the board brought in part-time employees in hopes of keeping it open, but that it no longer appeared feasible.

"It's something we feel badly about," Silverman said. "I don't think the center was ever on solid financial ground; I think Paul did an amazing job in securing funding."

Gattone opened the center in 1989 with a \$20,000 grant from the Wallace Foundation. It settled into offices at 611 N. Fourth Ave. Over the years, the center called for police oversight, homeless rights, prisoner rights and raising the minimum wage in the city and fought for same-sex marriages. The center once sued to allow a poetry magazine to publish autopsy photos.

Over the past few years, most of the center's cases involved resolving landlord-tenant issues and other housing disputes.

Although other organizations such as Southern Arizona [Legal Aid](#) assist with landlord-tenant issues, he said indigent people threatened with eviction may have trouble finding legal help.